

SWAHILI FORUM (2017): iv-vii

## REVIEW

***Ushairi na uhuru. Poesie scelte di Abdilatif Abdalla e Euphrase Kezilahabi. Mkusanyo wa tungo za Abdilatif Abdalla e Euphrase Kezilahabi. Curatori e traduttori. Wahariri na wafasiri Flavia Aiello e Roberto Gaudio. Napoli: Il Torcoliere, 2017, 99 pp, ISBN 978-88-6719-145-1.***

It is not often that one finds Italian translations of Swahili literature. While there has indeed been a steady stream of literary exchange between Italian and Swahili, it has been a modest one. Many Swahili literary works, mostly novels, have been translated into Italian by students of the University of Naples “L’Orientale”, but regrettably remain unpublished. A few short stories, plays and poetry have been published in collections, specialist magazines and books. However, there is still much to be done, as far as the translation of both classical and contemporary literary works is concerned.

If translation flows characterise the evolution of literary exchange between cultures (Sapiro 2008: 21), *Ushairi na uhuru* represents a precious contribution to the flows of translation from African-language literatures in general and Swahili literature in particular. This interesting volume presents the Italian translations of poems from two Swahili writers: Abdilatif Abdalla and Euphrase Kezilahabi. The work is the result of the collaboration between Flavia Aiello, lecturer in Swahili language and literature at the University of Naples “L’Orientale”, and Roberto Gaudio, poet and post-doc fellow at the University of Naples “L’Orientale”. Aiello and Gaudio are both experienced and engaged translators. Aiello spearheaded the translation of Swahili novels into Italian with her translation of Said Ahmed Mohamed’s novel *Utengano*, translated as *Separazione* (Soveria Mannelli: Edizioni Iride, 2005). Gaudio has translated numerous poems by Kezilahabi into Italian for specialist journals and magazines, and has pioneered the translation of Italian poetry into Swahili by translating Giacomo Leopardi.

The present book consists of two parts. The first includes introductory and critical remarks that comment on the collection of poems and on their translations. These introductory remarks are written in Swahili and accompanied by Italian translations. This first part of the book includes a foreword written by Ernesta S. Mosha, director of the Department of Swahili Studies of the University of Dar es Salaam (Taasisi ya Taaluma za Kiswahili, Tataki), a first introduction written by the editors and translators of the volume, and a second introduction by Mugyabuso M. Mulokozi, Professor of Literature at the Institute of Kiswahili Research at the University of Dar es Salaam. In the foreword Mosha highlights the importance of circulating Swahili literature, particularly poetry, in the Italian literary landscape as well as at the global level. She points to the pressing need to promote a literary exchange that bears witness to the pluralistic and heterogeneous nature of Swahili literary and linguistic traditions. In this respect, she views the cooperation between the universities of Naples and Dar es Salaam over more than fifteen years as the

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embodiment of such a commitment, emphasising projects and initiatives that have given strength to the promotion of literary and linguistic research between Italy and Tanzania. The editors' and translators' introduction lingers on the aesthetic qualities of the selected poems, with a description of the aims set forth by the translators and the translation strategies applied. Mulokozi's dense introduction starts off by bringing to the fore the issue of the visibility of literatures in African languages in world literary space and the tendency to push those authors who choose not to write in Europhone languages to the fringes of the literary world. After having set the scene, Mulokozi unfolds a narrative about the selected Swahili poems that takes an intimate and personal tone, while at the same time providing an analysis that places the poems against the background of the social and historical context in which they originated. Mulokozi draws a parallel between the author's philosophies on existence and on social and political realities, portraying aesthetic, thematic and political factors that either divide or unite Abdalla and Kezilahabi. The bilingual nature of the introductory texts in this volume makes it appeal to both Swahili- and Italian-speaking readers. The second part of the volume comprises the selection of poems itself, with facing-text translations. Abdalla's poems are selected from the collection *Sauti ya dhiki* ('Voice of agony', Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1973), while Kezilahabi's poems are taken from three collections: *Kichomi* ('Stabbing pain', Nairobi: Heinemann, 1973), *Karibu ndani* ('Welcome inside', Dar es Salaam: University Press, 1988) and *Dhifa* ('Feast', Nairobi: Vide-Muwa, 2008). Kezilahabi's poems travel through more than thirty years of his poetic production and reflect different historical phases of Tanzania after independence. A precious bonus included in the volume is the two unpublished poems it contains, "Ukurasa bikira" ('Virgin page') by Abdalla and "Kirudi kina shaka, shuku na kero" ('The return is marked with doubt, suspicion and annoyance') by Kezilahabi. The selection of poems is an interesting representation of Swahili poetic artistry, bearing witness to the diversity and heterogeneity of Swahili poetry. Abdalla and Kezilahabi are in fact two poets with very different cultural and artistic backgrounds: the former, from the Kenyan coast, writes in Kimvita and privileges the rules of classical Swahili poetry; the latter, from continental Tanzania, is an advocate of free verse (*mtiririko*) and writes in standard Swahili with some Kikerewe inflections. Aside from their differences, both of them write their poetry in the context of constructing a new society following the attainment of independence. In fact, the *fil rouge* connecting the poems selected for this volume is, as the title suggests, poetry as an instrument for the defense of freedom, by means of a search for truth mediated by the experience of pain and torment, isolation and feeling of powerlessness.

Abdalla's poems are translated by Aiello, who should be credited for having preserved the meter and rhyme of the original verses, and for having vividly transmitted the spontaneity of the essential – though dense – language of the Swahili poet. Aiello recovers some archaic forms from the Italian poetic register to evoke the tone of the classical Swahili poetic tradition, and beautifully renders linguistic peculiarities into Italian; one example that bears mentioning is the rendition of the poem "Kuno kunena" ('This talking'), in which the distinctive alliteration of the sound *k* corresponds to the repetition of the sound *p* in the Italian version. Kezilahabi's poems are translated by Gaudio.

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His Italian verses reveal an attentive examination, a veritable dissection, of the *letter*, its deepest and metaphorical meanings, and its relationship with sound and rhythm. Gaudioso transmits the spirit of Kezilahabi's language, condensed as it is into two levels, that of daily conversation and a more profound level of allusion and symbolism. Both translators adopt a *modus operandi* that brings the reader closer to the text. The Italian texts retain elements peculiar to the East African cultural universe, such as the symbologies of the termite nest, the coconut palm or the pumpkin, for instance, or maintain Swahili words, such as *chapati* or *unyago*, without any further explanation – which, however, might render access to the poems difficult for readers unfamiliar with Swahili. In this sense, the foreignness of the original verses emerges prominently in the Italian translation. Aiello's and Gaudioso's translations, therefore, follow the direction outlined by Berman (2004: 285), who considered the accentuation of strangeness as the only way to give access to the wor(l)d of the other. Indeed, as the translators state in their introduction, the aim of their translation “non era trasferire il testo originale nella lingua e cultura italiana ma tentare di arricchire i testi in italiano della potenza poetica degli originali” (p. 15), ‘was not that of transferring the original text into the Italian language and culture, but attempting to enrich the Italian texts with the poetic intensity of the originals’ (my translation).

Yet the volume is indeed enriched by the former aim. The Italian translations of Abdalla's poem “Kuno kunena” and Kezilahabi's “Wimbo wa mlevi” (‘The song of the drunkard’) are accompanied by masterful translations into Neapolitan by the poet, essayist and art critic Mimmo Grasso,<sup>1</sup> translated as “‘O pparlà” and “‘O mbriaco”, respectively. Starting from the Italian texts, the poet undertakes what Meschonnic (1972: 307) defined as a process of annexation, a rethinking of the relationship between source and target texts and localization into the receiving cultural and aesthetic contexts. On one hand, the translation into Neapolitan is able to retain some tangible Swahili linguistic and cultural elements. The rendition of “maji ya kunde” (‘bean water’), translated as “ll’acqua chiara/addò se spogna ’o gghianco r’ ’e fasule” (‘clear water/ which the white of the beans soaks up’), for instance, while remaining close to the Swahili context, nevertheless perfectly suits Neapolitan material culture. On the other hand, Grasso undertook a localization of the source into a Neapolitan setting and injected indigenous cultural references into the narrative. Grasso draws from the local popular tradition and populates his texts with characters familiar to the Neapolitan reader, such as the dichotomous figures of “‘o lazzaro” (‘the layabout’) and “‘o Re” (‘the King’), or the character of Ranzullo from the Neapolitan nativity play *La cantata dei pastori* (‘The song of the shepherds’). The collaboration with the poet Grasso and the decision to include two Neapolitan translations in the volume sprung from the editors’ and translators’ will to establish a connection with the territory in which the University of Naples “L’Orientale” is located, and therefore characterise the context in which the volume was born.

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<sup>1</sup> Grasso has also collaborated with the Lamu poet Mahmoud Ahmad Abdulkadir on artistic performances in Naples and, together with Gaudioso, has translated one poem of the Lamuan writer.

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Among the many interesting things about the volume is that it is enriched with some visual material: in the book there are beautiful black and white pictures that show the Swahili poets and describe their personal relationship against the backdrop of 1970s-era Dar es Salaam at its apex as a political, artistic and philosophical laboratory, along with photos depicting the poets on a stay in Mainz for their academic collaboration.

This book constitutes a precious resource for scholars interested in Swahili poetry, literary translation and comparative literature. In my view, two fundamental sources of potential arise from the volume. Firstly, even if its release as an academic publication would probably mean distribution on a small scale, the translation of these creative writings into Italian contribute to enhancing the visibility and presence of Swahili literature in the international literary market. Swahili literature has not been sufficiently translated into other languages, and this volume testifies to the editors' commitment to promoting Swahili literature in translation. Secondly, the publication of the translation into Italian might be an important factor in promoting exchange between the fields of Swahili literature and the comparative criticism of African-language literatures in Italy. Still, the potential might reach beyond Italian borders. The texts in translation not only epitomise translation as a form of transcultural communication, but can also become a form of trans-academic communication and collaboration. As Mulokozi states in his introduction, his hope is that “chapisho hili halitabakia katika Kiitaliano tu, bali litafasiriwa na kuchapishwa katika lugha nyingi nyingine za dunia” (p. 38), ‘this publication will not be confined solely to Italian, but will be translated into many other languages of the world’. Indeed, it would be auspicious to see the volume extended to more languages as it will hopefully inspire similar initiatives.

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